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Evolving English Through the Critical Analysis of Language

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Abstract

Through advocacy and critical analysis, linguistic practices that support and reinforce discriminatory beliefs and prevailing hegemonic systems have long been addressed by a variety of invested and interested parties. Whilst the efforts of these movements have enacted change in linguistic and cultural practices to varying degrees, they have not always been met with the acceptance or understanding at the level intended. This paper seeks to briefly examine the motivation and history that has propelled some of these shifts in discourse and language use, as well as highlight some examples of linguistic developments that have resulted from activism related to these issues. Furthermore, we examine the backlash against such movements and the unanticipated developments this has fostered.

Key words: diversity, language change, feminist language, language advocacy, discriminatory language, critical discourse analysis

Introduction

Language practices that help to maintain discriminatory hegemonic practices have been analysed by critical linguists from a variety of fields for many years now: their motivation being to highlight how language reflects and helps to preserve a biased state of privilege, which unfairly disadvantages those not within the elite power group. These critiques call out the ways in which language is used, or

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expected to be used, by certain groups in order to maintain the status quo and the perceived legitimacy and innateness of the current state of affairs. These analysts endeavour to eradicate these practices by calling for change and offering alternatives in an effort to achieve greater equity for all.

Critical Language Analysis and Language Change

Feminist Critical Analysis—Lexical Level Implications

Contemporary feminist language critiques evolved during the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Pauwels, 2011). This work focused primarily on explicit sexist language and the lexical level practices that favoured men. It highlighted not only how language is used in explicitly sexist ways, but also how language reinforces stereotypes and the believed inherence of what it means to be 'male' and 'female'. In her seminal work *Language and woman's place*, Lakoff (1973) explored the ways in which language was being used during the 1970s by men and women, helping to encode not only societal expectations, but also how it in turn aided in impeding women's ability to advance to positions of power, or even to be taken seriously. She explained how certain lexical items, such as more discreet knowledge of colours, were viewed as feminine and implicitly evaluated to be more frivolous due to a woman's surplus amount of non-working hours permitting her to gain such knowledge. Lakoff (1973) further highlighted that women used seemingly weaker discourse practices, such as a greater likelihood to use tag questions, which were deemed to demonstrate uncertainty. Also, women avoided profanity as its utterance indicated an unacceptably heightened state of emotion for a woman to display. These tendencies reinforced the belief that men are somehow stronger, more decisive, and natural born leaders. Finally, Lakoff (1973), also chronicled how the vocabulary used to describe women, or even the need to add a female descriptor, undermined them and their position within society. This was evidenced by the differing levels of authority the word *lady* and *man* carry when describing someone, with the former regarded as more trivial, and the conflicting implications of using words that had once had the same origin, such as *master* and *mistress*, but whose use had diverged into very different tiers of meaning, with the latter used to sexualize women and the former used to describe someone at an elite level of achievement. Furthermore, the problematic nature of address titles that identified a woman as married or not (i.e. *Miss* or *Mrs*) compared with the lack of the same dichotomy for men was also challenged.

Through the critiques of scholars like Lakoff (1973), and the work it motivated, recommendations for reform based on lexical level avoidance, deletion, and replacement were formed. Thus, we have today the adoption of the term *Ms* for

women who prefer to avoid explicitly marking their marital status, and terms such as *policeman* or *chairman* have been replaced by *police officer* and *chair*. Indeed, as an example of this impact, The University of Western Australia, a leading Australian university, advocates non-discriminatory language use by listing preferred alternatives to the standard or traditional forms on their public website (see Table 1).

Table 1 Examples from the University of Western Australia's Guidelines on the Use of Non-Discriminatory Language

Instead of:	Use:
<i>Titles of address, rank, occupation, status</i> Use a first name, a neutral title or nothing.	
Miss or Mrs	Ms to parallel Mr (except where the woman prefers Miss or Mrs)
<i>Personal Pronouns</i> Use he, his, him, himself only when referring specifically to a male person. The use of he and she, she and he, she/he, s/he to refer to either female or male person can be cumbersome. The following are acceptable alternatives: Rewrite the sentence in plural or passive.	
The lecturer will display his timetable on his door	Lecturers will display their timetable on their office doors
He must return it by the due date.	It must be returned by the due date.
<i>Gender Descriptions</i> Avoid irrelevant, gratuitous gender descriptions.	
A woman doctor	A doctor
A male nurse	A nurse
<i>Occupational Descriptions</i> When referring to a position, a quality or an action that might apply to either sex, use a sex neutral term. Also, avoid the use of man or of composite words involving the syllable – man, which imply the term is exclusively male.	
businessman	executive/ business executive
chairman	chair
foreman	supervisor

Importantly, critical analysis of sexist language by feminists has not only advocated for change at the lexical level, but also added to the lexicon itself by naming previously invisible issues suffered by women. The work by these scholars gave rise to new terms such as: *chauvinism*, *sexism*, *sexual harassment* and *marital rape* in order to bring visibility to those formerly concealed concerns (Lazar, 2008).

Discursive Sexism

By the 1990s, feminist critiques of sexist language were moving away from the previous essentialist view of gender and instead looking at how implicit sexism is conveyed in language as a whole and how it assists in the performance of gender (Pauwels, 2011). This concentrated on how sexist language is performed in different circumstances and surroundings, and related to how people engage in social practices that construct meaning and identity (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999). To answer this kind of discursive sexism Mills (2008) advocated for meta-statements or meta discourse. That being, engaging different verbal strategies, such as direct and indirect comments, humour, and offering alternatives, to address any encountered sexism (Pauwels, 2011). This, of course, created space for new discussions in public discursive practices about sexist language, how it is performed, and its implications.

Moving forward, Pauwels (2011) posits that both methodologies stemming from the different waves of feminist linguistic activism, i.e. the need to address lexical level sexism as well as the use of meta-discourse to highlight implicit and discursive based sexism, will be required in order to address the still prevalent use of language that helps to maintain patriarchal hegemonic beliefs and practices in society today.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Other Discriminatory Language

Identifying and critically analyzing the ways in which language can be discriminatory is not unique to feminist language analysts. Even within critical feminist discourse there has been an awareness that this is not an isolated issue (Lazar, 2008). Indeed, other movements have critiqued problematic language use in diverse areas for the less privileged (Wodak, 2008). Additionally, as critical discourse analysis (CDA) is concerned with how language is used in discriminatory and racist ways, it has become a useful tool in this field.

CDA looks at the ways language is utilised to problematize or marginalize less powerful groups. In particular, it analyzes the role the mass media plays in helping to scrutinize the vulnerable through its reproduction of the discourse and beliefs used by those in power (Wodak, 2008), for example, the use of *illegal* to describe a refugee in a news report, or the reproduction of stereotypes in women's magazines (Wodak, 2008). Thus, it has assisted in greater scrutiny of the way in which the mass media affect and influence popular discourse.

Furthermore, these efforts to understand and highlight discriminatory language have also helped to recognize previously underrepresented areas in the way that language can highlight negative stereotypes and beliefs. Indeed, Gendron et al. (2015) discuss how students in a senior mentoring program inadvertently described their mentors in ageist terms even when trying to compliment them. Language that

conveyed an innate positiveness for being young and a negativity for being old was often used when describing mentors who did not fit what was assumed to be the average senior. For example, describing a mentor as a free and young spirit because she enjoys dates and parties was identified as being inherently ageist as it was assumed that senior mentors would not be interested in such activities. Furthermore, they found these beliefs so pervasive that the seniors themselves participated in perpetuating the stereotypes by deflecting the use of *old* and insisting they were *mature* or saying that *age is just a number*.

As evidenced above, discriminatory language comes in many forms and scholars have long worked towards change and greater equity, by helping to highlight how discourse can affect the vulnerable and less privileged. This has resulted in a heightened awareness of the power that exists within language use today.

Shifts in Discriminatory Language & Backlash

Language Shift

Although exposing how language marginalizes those with less power has brought about some transformation, it has not eradicated the situation, and, in fact, has given rise to modifications in the ways that these problematic discourses are performed. Indeed, Lazar (2008) and Wodak (2008) discuss how sexist and racist discourses still exist, but have been recast over time from being performed explicitly to much more implicitly. Indeed, Wodak (2008) explains how discourse around racist rhetoric has changed how it is enacted and framed by those who explain and adhere to its legitimacy. She describes that this new type of racist discourse has moved from being expressed as overtly essentialist, or relating to biology, to using social characteristics such as protecting one's local community and jobs, which also helps to diffuse criticism due to its seeming rationality. This has been further exacerbated by fewer opportunities to platforms, such as representation in positions of power and the mass media that would allow those in less privileged positions to help deflect and alter the rhetorics and stereotypes that are being promoted (van Dijk, 2003).

Furthermore, Lazar (2008) explains that though advocacy has seen greater visibility of women in domains once considered male, such as the police force, the preferred communicative style has remained inherently male, with rhetoric deemed more feminine still viewed less favourably in regards to authority and seriousness. Women in turn explain that they feel the pressure to adhere to this expectation and so use conventional male discourse styles in order to fit in and appear professional.

Therefore, though knowledge of discourses that disadvantage certain groups has

raised awareness and enacted change, it hasn't always resulted in the desired outcome. Instead, it has been seen to motivate a shift in how discriminatory language is performed or continues to perpetuate stereotypes and encourage prevailing standards such as women needing to adopt certain language practices to help ensure professional success.

Backlash-Political Correctness

The advocacy for changing discriminatory language has not been without its critics. Indeed, these discussions are often dubbed as *political correctness* gone too far (Hopton, 1997). They are painted as mere word games that result in censorship and reverse discrimination, instead of addressing the complex structural and ideological reciprocity being performed by the identified discriminatory language (Hopton, 1997).

Indeed, Loftus (2008) found negative attitudes, primarily from caucasian heteronormative men, within the British Police Force towards changes and policies that had been made to address not only the underrepresentation of minorities and women in the force, but the efforts to eradicate racist and sexist language. Loftus (2008), further discovered that whilst these policies and changes had resulted in more diverse representation of the community within the force, and that direct discriminatory language had significantly reduced, it had also motivated problematic language use to become more implicit and used only between ingroup members privately.

Conclusion

The discourse surrounding discriminatory language continues today. However, as evidenced by the shifts it takes and the negative reaction some have to it, the equality and change that scholars have been striving for has not yet been reached. Some fail to accept language's ability to represent and support prevailing biased hegemonic practices and the deeper impact that language use can have. Furthermore, as these discussions continue, new ways in which language can be employed to discriminate are being discovered and reported. Therefore, this critical analysis of language will continue to impact how language is used and analysed for the foreseeable future.

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